

THE USE OF SOCIAL CULTURE AND LANGUAGE IN LEARNING AMERICAN LITERATURE

Isnawaty Lydia Wantasen
Universitas SamRatulangi, Manado, Sulawesi Utara

Abstract

A work of literature is a reflection of events or phenomena in the society and expressed in several literary genre, such as drama, prose and poetry. It is also known that social environment plays an important role in creating the culture and this is inseparable from the role of language. As a means of communication, language expresses all these social events loaded with moral values. Learning social culture and language shall contribute to the horizon of knowledge. This paper tries to investigate the use of social culture and language in an attempt to learn American culture.

Apart from the clear fact that there is a close relationship between language and culture, it should be noted that language is part of culture not the other way around. Therefore when learning a language, at the same time the students need to be equipped with the knowledge of culture. Most importantly, in learning literature, it involves learning the language and culture.

Key words: social, culture, language, literature

A. INRODUCTION

It is undeniably true that most students are rarely interested in literature because there are only a small number of people who are really keen on and take up this subject for their study. Due to this unfavorable fact, I would like to discuss about it. The discussion will focus on *'The Use of Social Culture and Language in Learning American Literature'*.

Globalization has come to us and no nation, country or government can escape from it. It is huge global force, whose action affect the lives of big and small countries alike, either positively or negatively. In era of globalization, the borderline between one country to another is more transparent. So the needs of learning human beings in different social culture are greatly needed. One of the alternatives to learn social culture of other countries through literature. In literature, one may study the people, the culture, the tradition and the identity of a literature that is being studied. Everyone, wants to learn a literary work, has to study the language and the cultural background of

Learning literature understands the culture, the character and the identity of a designed literature. Therefore one must remember that teaching or learning foreign literature has to include learning the country, the people and the culture.

B. MASTERY OF THE LANGUAGE SKILLS AS THE BASIS FOR LEARNING LITERATURE

To communicate with others, we use language. According to Fananie, *as a means of communication, Language has some functions such as a cause of why a certain event happened, a regulation to control a certain event, a representation to describe the event, an interaction and an imagination* (2000:25). Here, the basic need to learn foreign literature is learning language skill. Each language has its own characteristics. The misunderstanding on a sentence will lead the reader to the wrong way in interpreting a literary work. That is the teacher's task to integrate on language skill with the material on literary studies. The integrated between the material of language lesson and the material of literary studies will help students to get interest in studying literature.

Communication can be defined simply as the process by which individuals share information, idea and attitude. A key word in this definition is 'share' which means to give or receive a part of something or to enjoy or assume something in common. Communication can also define as 'Process of delivering a message by meaningful symbol as the fusion of thought and feeling, in the form of idea, information, beliefs, hope appeal, etc, which is done by one to another which intends to change the behavior, view, or deed either directly face to face or indirectly through media' (Shmidt, 1992:68).

Building activities based on language and literary skills requires the teacher's ability of careful planning and creativity for new ideas to stimulate students' interests and active participation. Teachers should use design beside text provided by institution to teach students. The integrated between the material of language lesson and the material of literary studies will help students to get interest in studying literature.

Reading comprehension is the best subject to introduce a piece of literary work. In reading comprehension subject, teacher may stimulate student's interest by offering a piece of short stories from some famous author (Emerson, Davis Thoreau, Hawthorne, or even Shakespeare's drama that is retold in form of fiction). It will be more interesting to

discuss the main idea; the main point, the paragraphs and the meaning from a literary story that only explain news from a text book. Various stories will create new nuances.

Learning literature through drama on stage will provide students with two aspects. Drama on stage will enable students to practice their English fluently, to pronounce it well. It trains the students to get adjust what they say and want they think. On the other side, it also trains the students to understand what they speak in drama story. So, listening, speaking and comprehending will be trained practically. Drama on text will train students to comprehend dialog, sentence, the surface and the deep meaning, lexical and contextual, connotation or denotation through the sentences.

Mastering language or having language skill will enable students to explore people, country and culture from social, cultural and historical books that inform them about situation and condition of foreign country.

C. SOCIAL CULTURE AS THE BACKGROUND INFORMATION TO LEARN CULTURE

When we think about human groups, the idea of culture often seems commonplace and indispensable. But what exactly is ‘culture?’ In common usage, the term has a number of overlapping yet contradictory connotations. Here, I will sketch the various things we might commonly mean when we refer to culture, explaining why these ambiguities exist. I will suggest that contemporary scholarship on culture in the humanities and social sciences resolves earlier ambiguities by implicitly or explicitly treating culture as **process of meaning-making**. Cultural sociology, combining interdisciplinary influences with sociological presuppositions, examines meaning-making process along three specific dimensions; meaning making in everyday action, the institutional production of meaning, and the shared mental frameworks which are the tools of meaning-making (Spillman, 2002:2)

Knowledge on social culture will provide students with the background information about the society in literary works, the environment of the author and the social culture of the story where it happened.

Understanding the people, the society, the customs, the habits and the different language will help students to uncover the black, the dim or the vague part in a literary work. Reading an interesting literary work as a fiction world will stimulate students to

explore a real world. Exploring a literary work related to social condition in society where the story happened, and to study the phenomena might happen in reality.

According to Harry Lavin (1973:63) '*Literature is not only the effect of social causes, it also the cause of social effect*'. Related to this idea, one may say that to study a literary work means also study the social culture condition. On the other hand, studying social culture with language and in learning literature will give better understanding of the country, the people and their identities. Social culture studies give students a chance to deepen their insights into the country and the people whose language and literature is being learned.

Having knowledge on social culture enable students to explore and to involve in reading a literary work. For the students who have learned American culture, its people and its country, would find more interesting and helpful to read '*The Death of Salesman*' a drama written by Arthur Miller, compare to those who do not understand American characteristics. The major theme in the play is the falsity of the American Dream. It was written in the early nineteenth century when America was known as an industrial country. In this novel, we try to describing the meaning of contextual, connotation, symbols and others in some sentences. Willy Loman represents the primary target of this dream. Like most middle-class working men, he struggles to provide financial security for his family and dreams about making himself a huge financial success. After years of working as a traveling salesman, Willy Loman has only an old car, an empty house, and a defeated spirit. Miller chose the job of salesman carefully for his American Dreamer. A salesman does not make his/her own product, has not mastered a particular skill or a body of knowledge, and works on the empty substance of dreams and promises. Additionally, a salesman must sell his/her personality as much as his/her product. Willy Loman falsely believes he needs nothing more than to be well liked to make it big. Willy is also unable to see change. He is man lost in the modern era of technology. He says, "**How can they whip cheese?**" and is constantly "**in a race with the junkyard.**"

Willy attempts to provide financial security and to guide his son's future, neither of which he does very well. Unlike the myth of economic mobility in America, the vast majority of people in the working class stay in the working class generation after generation. However, the myth is what Willy Loman lives on. Unfortunately, his illusions do not fit his reality. "**You can't eat the orange and throw the peel a**

a piece of fruit.” Willy has lost at trying to live the American Dream and the play can be viewed as commentary about society. Willy was a man who was worked all his life by the machinery of Democracy and Free Enterprise and was then spit mercilessly out, spent like a “piece of fruit”. This reality versus illusion problem eventually brings Willy’s downfall. In the end, Willy believes that a man can be “worth more dead than alive”. Finally, the only solution to providing for his family is to kill him so that they can collect on his life insurance. **“After all the highways, and the trains, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive.”**

D. LITERATURE AS AN ALTERNATIVE WORLD IN LEARNED PEOPLE

Langlang and Tom Burns said that ‘Literature is an attempt to make sense of our lives. Sociology is an attempt to make sense of the way in which we live (1973:9).

Exploring a literary work means to question the phenomena emerge in society. Understanding phenomena lead to understand the character. As the alternative world, literature gives a chance to student to explore human being through the character in literary work, as Plato said that ‘Literature is an imitation of a reality’.

Through literature one may learn about characteristic, even a character in story may become a reference to other fields. Most of us understand or familiar with the word of Oedipus complex that is introduced in medicine field as a kind of mental illness. But not many understand that the name is taken from the Greek story of Oedipus, King of Thebes, who married his mother, written by Sophocles.

After 1980 there was a popular symptom among American women called Cinderella complex in America, introduced by Collette Dowling in her book based on her experience. Most Americans want to be Cinderella. It is well known as American dream. They are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. It is also reflected in Cinderella tale. The Cinderella Complex is written from the central and centering vantage point of straight-ahead psychology; not politics or spirituality. It was designed for courageous women ready to reexamine their hearts and souls in the context of the true dynamics and hidden reasons for many of the dysfunctions and even existence of their most important interpersonal relationships (1981: 6). Dowling in actuality was among the first to successfully teach the general public some of the basic ideas of psychology and their relevance to their world, in those changing times, in the context of

adulthood really means. As it turns out, her metaphor of the Cinderella Complex—the desire to search outside of oneself for the source of inner emotional malaise or turmoil, and to hold a "prince" of some kind accountable for both one's maturity and rescue from the secret pains of independence—is perfect for all people, men and women. The statement is supported by what Cawelty defined about Cinderella that it is a plot on overcoming of some combination of social and psychological barriers which the poor girl who falls in love with some rich or aristocratic man and it (1996: 42). The Cinderella story tells about a poor girl named Cinderella who lived with her stepmother and her two sisters who always asked her to work all day. In performance she is strictly different with her two sisters; she just wears rag clothes while her two sisters looked beautiful with their elegant dress. If I may say that the dress which is worn by Cinderella (rags) symbolizes America in the previous time, in a long-long time ago when America was being as a primitive land since it was covered by gloomy forests and inhabited by wild beasts and dangerous savages. "...*There was a burst of light and a fairy appeared. . Don't be alarmed, Cinderella., said the fairy. I know you would love to go to the ball. And so you shall!. . How can I, dressed in rags?. Cinderella replied*" But now what we can see America becomes a superpower country and the fact cannot be separated by their hardworking. It is an analogy like from rags to rich and it is a reflection of the American dream; one of it is pursuit of happiness especially in material things. The explicit meaning in this case is one will get the success if he work hard. In my opinion it is normal if one has a dream as the motivation to pursuit what he/she want and of course he/she should work hard to make the dream came true. Cinderella also felt that there is no freedom in her life. She has to obey all rules made by her stepmother. One day, beautiful new dresses arrived at the house. A ball was to be held at the palace and the stepsisters were getting ready to go. Cinderella didn't even dare ask if she could go too. She knew very well what the answer would be: . You? You're staying at home to wash the dishes, scrub the floors and turn down the beds for your stepsisters. They will come home tired and very sleepy. What the connotation meaning of the sentences is most Americans want to get **Liberty** in their life. On the other hand, the story it is told that Cinderella was eagerly to go to the Princes' party but she has no dress and shoes to go there. The party was held on the palace. **The palace may be a symbol of America as the promised land** where everyone is willing to go and stay there. The story has a happy

married her. The end of the story just like what America had experienced from England as the mother country before they got the liberty. In this story, the stepmother and the two sisters are depicted as the mother country (England/Europe characteristics) which colonizes tightly America as their colony. At the end both America and Cinderella got their freedom.

In Minangkabau, there is a story that is usually told by parents to their children to teach them not to oppose against parents. The story of 'Malin Kundang' a cursed-son, who went away, then ignored his mother. At the end he got cursed and become a stone. And in each country, they have the specific story to teach children.

In Britain or America, may be in many part of the world where they study Shakespeare works one could see that people like to quote Shakespeare poetic sentences to say something. They learned much about human characteristics, human conflicts, and human problem in Shakespeare drama. They studied human attitude, human behavior. For those who studied seriously the characters in literary work found that they also easily understand character in reality. Literature is one of alternative to offers student to sharpen feeling and mind.

Through literature one may also study the social culture, changing and human conflict in facing the charges, because the literature reveal the characteristics of certain era, certain people on certain places.

So, in order to get better understanding, that is the teacher's task to integrate between social, culture, and language skill to comprehend literature. Understanding all speech will enable student and teacher to broaden their horizon and to increase their knowledge and understanding on human being, human affairs and human science in the world.

E. CONCLUSION

In order to get better understanding of literary studies, related it to the universe, it will be much better to integrate the material of language, literature and social culture. The combination of learning foreign with practicing social cultural knowledge in teaching American literature is greatly needed. The teachers with foresight and creativity will get success to open window and invite the students to travel across the world in understanding more about culture, to establish a clear concept o

connotation and deep meaning of sentences, to uncover the dim and the vague parts of literary work, and to get better understanding of the strong as a whole.

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